

VI. Exit Fléchambeau

The moment was both ludicrous and dramatic.

As soon as they were indoors again, Pons sat down at his desk and composed an excusatory note to Monsieur Monempoix, informing him that they were obliged to take French leave by consequence of Fléchambeau's illness—a sudden illness, caused by the rigorous treatment he had undergone in order to make himself agreeable to Monsieur le Président.

Afterwards Pons went to wake Valentin and instructed him to transmit the note to its destination, without forgetting to recover from the President's residence the hats and overcoats they had left there.

When Valentin had gone, the two men looked one another in the face, Fléchambeau anxious and Pons perplexed. A formidable silence reigned: the silence of three pianos that no one is playing. Pons told himself that it was necessary to do something, at all costs. Fléchambeau, adrift in his smoking-jacket but straitjacketed by distress, was wearing an otherworldly expression.

"Why are you making that face?" Pons asked him, with a constrained smile.

Fléchambeau put all his violence and contempt into a shrug of his shoulders—and he began to wander back and forth distractedly, with his mouth set in stone and his eyes vague, like a bewildered mariner roaming through the interior of a submarine at sea.

"You look like a guide-dog that's lost its blind man," said Pons. "Why are you in such a bad temper? There's a remedy for everything. I once knew a one-eyed man who drank in order to see double; once drunk, he was just like you or me."

Fléchambeau used *le mot de Cambronne*.¹ Then he said: "The height-gauge!"

They went to his room. He took off his shoes and socks and set himself against the apparatus. The height-gauge indicated 173 centimeters and a half.

Pons furrowed his two eyebrows, for want of any more; he would have needed a hundred, like Argus of old, to express his annoyance.

Mary Stuart, odiously tranquil, squinted at them. Fléchambeau groaned.

"It's your fault too!" snapped the mortified doctor. "I didn't give you permission to swallow the pills. You began the treatment without my authorization. I told you: my experiments weren't concluded; my discovery wasn't complete. With regard to cats, animals, I was sure of myself and my drug. You can see that Mary Stuart isn't changing any more, can't you? She's stabilized—but you aren't. It's evident, therefore, that my drug doesn't have the same effect on humans as on cats."

"You're not telling me anything I don't know," said Fléchambeau. "But what's terrible is that I've shrunk two and a half centimeters in less than four hours!"

Pons, no longer able to find words to translate his consternation, uttered a belch of ire and impotence.

"Do something, damn it!" cried Fléchambeau, suddenly beside himself. "Do something! Don't stand there like a cretin! Give me a potion to drink, a bath in which to immerse myself. How do I know? There must surely be a remedy! Inject, massage, bleed, purge, sound, medicament away! At least take my pulse; consult, if necessary! Would you like to see my tongue?"

"That's not injured, at any rate," riposted the victim of this abuse. "There, there! Gently does it! Let's get a grip! First, I'll remind you that our abrupt departure deprived us of coffee and liqueurs. Coffee seems to me to be contraindicated, in view of your tone of exasperation, which is getting on my nerves—but liqueurs..."

He went in search of a bottle of cognac, whose three stars shone like Sirius, Altair and Vega...and they drank several small glasses of old Charentais alcohol, one after another.

Silence had fallen again, but the noise of hurried footsteps was audible outside in the Place de la République. A few moments later, Olga, breaking with all convention, came into Fléchambeau's room. She preceded Valentin, who was carrying the recovered items of clothing.

"Well?" she said, in an agonized tone.

¹ General Pierre Cambronne (1770-1842) commanded one of the last remnants of the Old Guard at Waterloo, where he was wounded and captured; while he was incapacitated, a rumor was put about that when his command was surrounded by enemy forces and called upon to surrender he had replied: "*La garde meurt et ne se rend pas*." [Guards die; they don't surrender.] A sarcastic counter-rumor was launched alleging that what he had actually said was "*Merde!*" [Shit]—a stronger expletive than its English equivalent. Cambronne's indignant protests that he had not said either only added to the notoriety of the double-edged anecdote. When Victor Hugo wrote *Les Misérables* (1862), *merde* was still unprintable, but Hugo, in order to convey the fact that his character had no scruples about using it, stated that he used "*le mot de Cambronne*" [Cambronne's word]—a precedent that many other authors gladly followed. Everything Cambronne actually said during his doubtless-colorful life has been completely forgotten

By way of response, Fléchambeau contented himself with a demonstration. He took his new hat from Valentin's hand, and put it on.

It came down over his nose and ears.

"Has he gone mad?" the young woman's eyes inquired of Pons.

"Your fiancé, Mademoiselle," the latter replied, "is continuing to decrease in size. And I'm asking myself how to stop his descent. Be reassured, though: I shall succeed. You'll be the wife of an exceedingly handsome gentleman of medium height, that's all."

"Is that it?" said Olga, joyfully. "Oh, Fléchambeau, my love, it's *in spite of* your abundant height that I loved you. I adore short men!"

Ah, the good little soul! There are women who know exactly what to say, and exactly when to say it! And what's more, she had thrown the most enchanting opera-cloak over her bare shoulders!

Mollified, Fléchambeau embraced her as best he could. He attempted, in spite of his distress, to put on a companionable smile. His lips remained taut, however—was the cognac astringent?—and his smile contracted upon his closed lips.

Olga went away, fully tranquilized.

But Fléchambeau could not sleep at all—and all night long, Pons worked in his laboratory, consulted books, racked his brains, manipulated a great many dangerous substances, and ground up seemingly-abominable pastes.

At daybreak, Fléchambeau, who was shorter than he had been, made a lugubrious entrance. "It's still continuing!" he lamented. "No amelioration! I'm losing my mind. I just massaged myself with dentifrice and tried to hang the soap on the towel-rail..." Abruptly, he got carried away. "I've had enough of it, you know! Animal! You've got no idea! When one goes out in an automobile, one looks to see if it has brakes, you know! One doesn't open a tap without being able to shut it off! I...I...I jeer at you! I tar-and-feather you!"

"You frighten me," said Pons, quite placidly. "You're like policemen who can't say a word without seeming to be furious. But everything will sort itself out, you'll see! Here, drink this mixture."

It was a frightful grey syrup, with white streaks, in a test tube.

Fléchambeau swallowed it as quickly as he could, with the customary grimace. "But it's ipecac!" he cried.²

Pons shrugged his shoulders; it was his turn. "Well, to be sure, if you imagine that it's ipecac, there's no point drinking it. Although the idea that it's ipecac... Ah! What did I say?"

Livid and wiping his mouth, Fléchambeau let himself fall into the friendly dimpled armchair. The poor fellow, delivered of the beverage, was in a sorry state. The sleeves and legs of his pajamas had been folded back three times over. A garment that become much too large always looks somewhat deflated, and makes a sad sight, doesn't it? To cap it all, the weather was grim, the barometer was falling and it was beginning to rain on the town, which was already less luminous than usual because the gigantic presence of the mountain was blocking off the northern sky.

A church bell rang.

"Who's being buried?" asked Fléchambeau.

"No one—it's a wedding. *To those who don't feel well/everything sounds the knell.*"

"Oaf!" said the victim, feebly. And they shook hands, fraternally and sympathetically.

Fléchambeau contemplated the pharmacy behind the glass fronts of the cupboards. "Curse it! To think that the remedy is there, but secret! To think that some combination of those multicolored substances would be sufficient to put a brake on my..."

"Resorption," supplied Pons. "You're resorbing yourself."

"To think," Fléchambeau went on, "that nature surrounds us, with its rocks, its plants, *etcetera*, with all that's necessary to cure everything! To think that there are 'incurables' who commit suicide lying upon the very herb that might save them! My God! My God! My God!"

And Pons bowed his head beneath the heavy hand of Fate.

He raised it again as if he had suffered an uppercut; Hope had struck him under the chin.

"Courage, damn it! Look: the Sun's appearing through the rain. And look again: *Pleasing the architect and the painter as well/The heptachrome rainbow rounds out its shell.*"

"Mercy, please!" Fléchambeau implored. "I'm in a bad way. My heart is hurting like a suppurating wound. Your *carabin's* jokes, you see...ah!"

But Pons was no so easily disarmed. "*Carabin!*" he said. "That word brings back the pleasant memory of a brave little companion of the operating theater. She had a lover nicknamed Gastibelza, because he was a man with a carbine..."³

² Ipecac—short for ipecacuanha—used to be a popular herbal medical treatment, employed as an emetic.

³ Once again, this wordplay—on *carabin* [a slang term for a medical student] and *carabine* [a carbine rifle]—is untranslatable. Gastibelza is a character in a popular ballad by Victor Hugo, in which he is characterized as "the man with the carbine;" Georges Brassens recorded a version of it.

“I’d rather go than listen to this,” said Fléchambeau—and did.

The Choderpils, the Dézormets and the Chabosseaus got their news from the morning paper. Those people certainly knew how to live! Pons and Fléchambeau were, however, visited by Monsieur and Madame Monempoix, accompanied by Olga; they only popped in briefly, the spouses being rather gloomy, and Olga desolate—but she obtained authorization from her parents to go back whenever she pleased.

It goes without saying that only the Monempoix family knew the truth. Everyone else believed in Fléchambeau’s temporary indisposition. A few days later, however, the suspicion began to grow that something mysterious was going on in Doctor Pons’s house and that Fléchambeau was the object of special attention on the part of Destiny.

There are stories that cannot be kept hidden, which spread with invincible force, whose strangeness is magnified as they pass from mouth to mouth, as long as no one has a very clear idea of what is going on. A statistician would have observed that many more people, especially women, were passing through the Place de la République, male and female citizens who were curiously distracted, apparently doing nothing, but who looked sideways at the house of mystery, to the extent that they sometimes bumped into one another, or got a jobbing carpenter’s plank in the eye, or stumbled over the fountain’s pavement, or fell head-first into the water-basin—as happened to old Baron Cormoranche, who only lived for rumor, gossip and slander.

In the meantime, the torture—or, more accurately, the passion—of Fléchambeau followed its course; for there are calvaries that one descends instead of climbing, and which are no less painful for it. Fléchambeau was descending now, without remission. The prospect of being a dwarf before the end of the month rendered him furious. He displayed an execrable temper. Let’s not even mention his nights. His awakenings? The awakenings of a condemned man. And his days? Oh, his days! Also those of a condemned man—condemned, not to the guillotine, but the height-gauge. The terrible height-gauge! A construction that did, indeed, take on a certain resemblance to the scaffold: the height-gauge that executed Fléchambeau 50 times over, from dawn to dusk; the height-gauge that measured the progress of his disgrace and the march of his martyrdom; the height-gauge that decapitated him of a head every week!

Other tortures, though secondary, exasperated him no less, hurling him into mad rages—such as, for example, the question of clothing. At first, he was bought small ones from the ready-made racks in the department store. Pons had proposed borrowing them, but Fléchambeau hated that idea; the repugnant mold of someone else’s joints gave him gooseflesh and made his hackles rise. In the meantime, he went from one costume to another as a traveler goes from one hotel to another.

Olga came often. Her gentle presence retained Fléchambeau on the slope of his anger, but it aggravated his sadness and filled him with a somber irony. He could no longer put his arm round her waist without seeming ridiculous. One day, she wanted to sit on his knee; he was beset by a fit of fury then, so forceful that tears came into his eyes. And Olga heard him singing, with a sharp and jeering voice that would have wrung your heart: “*My father has given me a husband, My God, what a man, what a tiny man! My father has given me a husband, My God, what a man, how tiny he is!*”⁴

He turned toward her, for he had retreated into a corner. “Tom Thumb!” he said, bitterly. “There you are! Tom Thumb!”

And what could be said in reply? Poor Fléchambeau!

The most bizarre thing was that he had continued to shrink quite properly. His proportions had not changed. There was still no wrinkling, and no shriveling. If he had been photographed, without including any object of comparison, the print would not have revealed anything of his general diminution. In reality, though, he was a dwarf: a dwarf with the proportions of a giant, the physiognomy of a giant, the gestures, the gait and even the habits of a giant. That was, in fact, truly extraordinary. If you imagine an elephant the size of a pony, a basilica the size of a maisonette... anything you like! It’s funny. You don’t know why, but it’s funny. And there’s nothing more sinister than wanting to laugh at something sad.

Olga’s role was delicate and difficult. Every woman is maternal toward those who, being small, resemble children. It’s not funny being small in any case, but when one has previously been large, what a disgrace it is!

In addition, Madame Monempoix was beginning to look sullen. She came more rarely, pinched, discontented and glacial. Olga was only able to care for Fléchambeau as she wished by virtue of a rebellion.

As for Monsieur Monempoix, he had become presidential again, making brief appearances and repeating tirelessly: *Capitis deminutio, capitis deminutio*,⁵ thinking that deputy Bargoulin enjoyed a normal and fixed

⁴ The lines are from a popular children’s song, which goes on interminably in the same vein.

⁵ Like most of the remarks M. Monempoix makes, this is a legal phrase, wrenched out of context but ironically apt. The Latin *Capus* [head] was also used metaphorically to mean “life” or “status;” in Roman law, *Capitis deminutio* referred to a legally-recognized a loss of status, of which there were varying degrees, ranging from loss of the headship of a family and exile to enslavement.

stature, and that deputies are, after all, created in order to deputize. “Never,” he said to himself. “Fléchambeau will never grow again—and I don’t want a son-in-law as tall as my boot!”

To grow again! Pons, meanwhile, was making every effort, in every way, to find the formula that would relaunch his friend heavenwards. Boxes of old books were arriving continually from Paris. He grew pale poring over treatises in histology, osteology and physiology. He grew thin. He lost sleep, his appetite for food and drink, his sense of humor, and even his sense of being alive. His profound eyes sank even further into their orbits; one might have feared that they were going to pop out of the back of his head.

As for Fléchambeau, he experienced all the terrors of his unfortunate fate, prayed ardently to the Lord his God, fervently repeating: “Fulfill me, Father, by granting my wish!” And—something worthy of note—he continually recovered impressions of childhood, having become so small that he was overwhelmed by the effort of moving a chair and had to climb on to a stool to look out of the window. These particularities did not give him any pleasure, even intellectually. Every day augmented his terror. At the outset, he had only feared the shame of being a dwarf; now, dwarf that he was, more frightful problems posed themselves to him. *How will all this end? Where will this diminution stop? Will it not simply proceed to annihilation? Will it not go on until death?*

A day came when the height-gauge, that gibbet, was unusable; the cursor did not come down low enough. Instruments of measurement are only constructed to accommodate that which is reasonable, not the creations of an insane hazard.

Fléchambeau measured 25 centimeters. He was so small that he had the look of having been born under a Brussels sprout. For some time he had gone to bed in the cradle that had played host to the earliest expansion of Olga and Bobiche. It was from the latter’s playthings that a doll’s bed was extracted, a sort of oaken Moses-basket, in which Fléchambeau had to resolve to spend the most agitated nights that any mortal had ever had to endure, until now. No human garment was sufficiently Lilliputian for him; Olga, weary of incessantly reducing those she had made for him, undressed Bobiche’s dolls one by one. Thus the pygmified Fléchambeau donned the uniform of a colonel of hussars. A living doll, he had only been wearing his red trousers and braided tunic for an hour when Pons caught him attaching a thread to the armrest of a chair in order to hang himself. That had a profound effect on the brave man, who recovered his verve momentarily.

“Suicide, then? Declaring bankruptcy! Have you gone mad? Come on, come on! You know very well that we’ll get out of this!”

“The only reasonable thing that one can do in this world,” cried Fléchambeau, “is to dispatch oneself to the other! The man who kills himself is exercising his most basic right, which is to get out of a place to which he did not ask to be admitted.”

“But his first duty is to do nothing about it,” Pons retorted. “Your religion, moreover, forbids you to leave us. Then again, we shall save you! You’ll grow again. You’ll marry Olga, and you’ll have lots of children, who’ll be very happy!”

“The best way of ensuring the happiness of one’s children is not to have any.”

“Nonsense! Your duty...”

“That rhymes with *fruity*.”⁶

“*Zut!* You’re discouraging. Listen Fléchambeau: once upon a time there were two twins. They resembled one another so perfectly that one day, the wife of one mistook the other for her husband. The confusion was such that the mistaken wife perpetrated he treason without realizing it. The deceived spouse found out. Indignant, he wanted to kill his brother, but the fatal resemblance was such that, being deluded in his turn, it was himself that he shot, believing that he was shooting at the guilty party, his fraternal double. By chance, he survived. Fortunately, the bullet had gone through his skull without injuring the vital organ. Well, you...”

“Leave me in peace!” said Fléchambeau. “It’s understood, I won’t make any more attempts on my life—but leave me alone. Go away! Turn round!”

The colonel’s uniform procured him a military soul, and incited him to command. He sometimes talked like a tiny phonograph whose amplifier has been removed in order not to annoy the neighbors. The next day but one, he became a toreador. After that, he was a Dieppe fisherman. Finally, he dressed himself in miniature togas, sewn by Olga, which assimilated him to the Romans, and beneath which he was as naked as a gymnosophist.⁷

No more monocle: consequence, poor vision. No more pipe, no more cigars (too large): consequence, bad temper. But these privations were nothing, compared to certain perils. Mary Stuart chased him, with the intention of devouring him. *The cat has taken him for a mouse! My God, what a man! What a tiny man!*

Completely out of breath, standing on Pons’s hand, which the latter put close to his ear, he demanded aid and protection.

Then the homunculus was taken into the laboratory. A dolls’ house that Bobiche had been given for Christmas was set up on a table. It was furnished with the miniature items of furniture that had come with it, and

⁶ In French, *devoir* [duty] rhymes with *poire* [pear]. English is not quite so obliging.

⁷ This term, whose initial reference was to an ascetic philosophical sect discovered in India by Alexander the Great, is sometimes applied—in English as well as French—to nudists.

a loudspeaker that amplified Fléchambeau's voice admirably. To finish the job, a wooden border was nailed around the table, for it only needed a window to be left open by mistake for the wind to carry the slight creature away as he walked in the enclosure.

That was not sufficient. A wasp, and then a large spider, nearly took possession of Fléchambeau and put an end to the story. A birdcage replaced the dolls' house, Valentin reinforced its metallic roof and sides—regardless of which, as a precaution, Pons armed Fléchambeau with a powerful sharply-pointed needle with a head of blue glass, which could serve him as a lance and permit him to defend himself against a fly, if it happened that a fly should insidiously penetrate that sort of food-cover...

The recluse was fed on scraps and crumbs. He was now the same order of magnitude as crickets and beetles. One evening, Pons felt a thrill of fear; he could no longer see him and, at the same time, a hairy caterpillar was climbing over the cage, like an errant moustache. False alarm! Fléchambeau was asleep behind a breadcrumb.

In order to communicate with him, a tube was now necessary. One put an ear to one extremity of the tube, and Fléchambeau spoke into the other—an instrument that was improved by the addition of an amplifier when the little voice became too thin.

Eventually, no microphone could any longer succeed in rendering Fléchambeau's murmur perceptible. The magnifying-glass with which people looked at him was then abandoned, being too weak. One of those monocular lenses that jewelers use to repair watches was substituted for it, and the sole means of communication thereafter consisted of reading what Fléchambeau wrote on extra-fine paper with the aid of a hair dipped in fine ink. It was, of course, a long time since he had been able to shave, so he wore a full beard, which changed him greatly. He devoted himself to a great many desperate and angry pantomimes, becoming smaller and smaller all the time, no longer being dressed in anything but the air around him, save for a parcel of some unknown substance, which was held on by some unknown means, and hid his you-know-what.

Pons had abandoned his research completely. To interrupt the diminution of Fléchambeau appeared to him to be quite impossible. The very smallness of the subject seemed to be an obstacle to the majority of medical treatments. Furthermore, Pons was now too unhappy, too grief-stricken, to be able to work lucidly. He never left the table that was Fléchambeau's domain—a domain that became more spacious for him with every passing day—and Olga spent many hours there, morning and evening, both of them contemplating through their jeweler's lenses the tiny, delicately-chiseled face of the figurine, whose red hair did for him what phosphorus does for the head of a match.

How would it end?

Fléchambeau, disheartened, made his will.

Whatever the cost, he wrote, I want a Christian burial. Arrange it!

"But you're not ill," Pons said to him. "Why are you talking about dying?" He took care to lower his voice and directed a small acoustic funnel made of paper at Fléchambeau, whose large opening was turned toward his own mouth.

"You're looking very well, my dear," said Olga.

I can't keep shrinking indefinitely!

"Why not?" said Pons, who had hesitated to pronounce those terrible words.

Fléchambeau's face expressed the utmost gravity. All three of them had been thinking about the same things for a long time, without saying anything.

"What has happened to you," Pons continued, "demonstrates that living tissues are far more plastic than anyone supposed, at least in the direction of reduction. Given that you have suffered no ill effects thus far, I don't see why your organism can't support a much more considerable diminution. Instead of thinking of yourself as shrinking, imagine that you're moving away, and the experience immediately takes on a different appearance..." Oh, how tight his throat was as he said that!

Going away, then, Fléchambeau traced.

"Yes, going away without moving..."

And without any hope of return!

"Do we ever know?" said Pons—but he felt tears coming. Olga's lens misted over too, and she took it away from her eye to wipe it.

You should have taken the pills too! Fléchambeau wrote. Leaving me alone is cowardly!

"I thought that I'd be more useful in another way," Pons said, by way of self-justification. "If I had shrunk too, who would have kept you safe? Who would watch over you...?"

That's true. I beg your pardon. But where am I going? What will happen? Alone! Without weapons. I can't take anything with me, since everything becomes increasingly disproportionate!

"Obviously. But a resourceful type like you will always get himself out of trouble—and Fléchambeau...you're undertaking a marvelous exploration! I've always maintained that the greatest adventures unfold in one place, that the greatest voyages are not effected geographically. I never imagined that my idea would take on a form as prodigious as that of your adventure!"

Fléchambeau appeared to meditate.

Pons, I know that the world isn't limited by the range of our senses. I know that our senses, themselves reduced, are limited. There are many things in the universe that they don't perceive naturally, some because they're too large, others because they're too small. Some of these things the progress of science has enabled us to discover: stars and microbes. So tell me, Doctor, what you know about the world into which I am going, involuntarily. First, do you think that we know about all microbes? We don't, do we?

"I believe in infinity," said Pons. "In the infinitely large and the infinitely small. The universe has no bounds in any direction. The Earth is only a ball of clay at a single point in endless space. What we call an atom measures a ten-millionth of a millimeter in diameter; now an atom is a solar system analogous to ours, a solar system in which the planets, 50,000 times smaller than the atom, rotate around a central star as the Earth turns around the Sun; and these infinitesimal suns, smaller than their planets, are a thousand million million times smaller than a millimeter. And everything leads us to suppose that these minuscule worlds contain others, which themselves contain others, inexhaustibly.

"It's probable that our Solar System is only an atom in relation to the great infinity, so great that the light of certain stars only reaches us after ten million years, at a velocity of 300,000 kilometers a second. It's probable that the great All is only an infinity of rotating systems, contained one within another, the dimensions of which, by their immensity or their smallness, escape, for the most part, not only our senses but also our understanding. As Nordmann⁸ has said: *Reality surpasses dreams, and overwhelms them.*"

Olga discreetly withdrew. Fléchambeau followed her with his eyes, an inaccessible giant of whom he retained within him an image proportionate to his own height. When she had gone, he asked: *But what about the microbes? The microbes!*

Pons realized the extent of his friend's anxiety. Alas! Was it really necessary to instruct him as he desired? Would he not die before disembarking, so to speak, in the land of bacteria? Must he give him an education in microbiology, as one informs a traveler about the mores of the populations he is going to visit?

I'm listening, traced Fléchambeau, with an impatient hair.

"There are," said Pons, "many more animals in the zoological Noah's Ark than even the lynx can see..." And he launched into a description of the microscopic fauna and flora, softening anything that might frighten Fléchambeau. Correcting in accordance with his intention, he introduced him to the malevolent customs of various tiny worms, road-bacteria, algae and fungi invisible to the naked eye of ordinary humans. By chance, he possessed a few preparations, which he enabled him to observe through the microscope. Fléchambeau, clinging to the ocular lens at the very top of the instrument, was reminiscent of an astronomer afflicted with dementia who had made the mistake of looking through his telescope the wrong way. But Pons, although he told him that to cheer him up, had no joy in his heart. On the contrary, Fléchambeau reminded him of an explorer condemned to depart for the Moon, and who was examining the distant world on which he feared that he would soon run aground.

After that, Fléchambeau was replaced on the table, with a thousand precautions, and the lesson went on, for a long time.

When Olga came back, opening the door unhurriedly to avoid any displacement of air, she heard Pons saying: "In a gram of hydrogen, according to the method one employs to count them, there are 650,000 or 683,000 billions of billions of atoms. If there were only 500,000 billion billion, the sky would be green, but if there were 700,000, the sky would be violet. With regard to hydrogen, though, I should perhaps inform you of Prout's Law..."⁹

"Ahem!" said Olga, fearful of some breach of good manner.

"Ah, Mademoiselle—you're here!"

"Yes," she whispered. "It's stronger than me; I've come back. I'm always afraid that some catastrophe will occur during my absence. But Valentin wants to see you, Doctor. A parcel has just been delivered..."

"I know what it is," whispered Pons. "It's a hypermicroscope, Mademoiselle—an ultra-violet microscope with quartz lenses and prisms. It provides magnifications of 400,000 diameters. With that, we might perhaps be able to follow him for a longer time..."

"Who, Fléchambeau?"

"Of course. Who else?"

"It's frightful! Frightful!"

Pons was amazed that anyone could be as pale without having died first.

⁸ Presumably the Finnish zoologist Alexander von Nordmann (1803-1866).

⁹ The "law" proposed by William Prout (1785-1850) in 1815—nowadays known as "Prout's hypothesis" because it had proven faulty long before Pons made this statement—suggested that the atoms of all the other elements were "compounds" of hydrogen atoms, and that their atomic weights ought, therefore, to be simple multiples of that of hydrogen.

An ordinary microscope sufficed, to begin with. We cannot say that the vision was perfect. These items of apparatus are not made for such uses. Even so, Fléchambeau was finally installed underneath the objective lens and, by ingenious miming, contrived to make himself understood.

It was at this point that the pathetic episode of the itch-mite, *Sarcoptes scabiei*, occurred.

A damnably dirty creature, this mite. It isn't a microbe, as you know, but an exceedingly villainous little monster, an acarion, a tiny louse that adores darkness and takes a malign pleasure in burrowing into the skin of people or other creatures, multiplying there with a depressing rapidity—a single pair can produce a million females and half a million males in three months¹⁰—and makes you itch in no time.

Pons was never able to explain how the mite had escaped from his tiny experimental menagerie, or by what sequence of incidents the animal found itself in the very last location where it should have been: on the thin glass slide that bore Fléchambeau and his fortune. We can only assume that it had remained there—or, rather, on one of its supports—after some parasitological observation. All that one can say, based on that hypothesis, is that the acarion had a durable life.

While Pons was taking a hygienic stroll, Olga, left alone in the laboratory, was on watch at the microscope. She perceived her fiancé—as she nobly insisted on calling him—as one distinguishes passers-by from the height of a sixth story. In order not to hurt Fléchambeau's eyes, the microscope's mirror only sent him a minimal amount of light. It was, in consequence, relative dark beneath the objective.

Suddenly, the mite appeared, monstrous and white, bristling with sharp spines, antennae and feet equipped with sucker, opening a beak whose two mandibles were reminiscent of a lobster's claws, and agitating all its redoubtable appendices with an unparalleled frenzy. Deprived of eyes but endowed with a very appreciable sense of orientation, it advanced gropingly toward Fléchambeau.

Now, by this time, Fléchambeau had diminished to such an extent that a female mite—for it was a female, four times as voluminous as a male—towered over him as the mammoth towered over our prehistoric ancestors. The comparison cannot be taken much further, given that our ancestors were dressed in furs and armed with flint axes, while Fléchambeau was unarmed and his only clothing was a layer of fine oil specially developed for microscopic examinations—a coating that preserved him from cold and might, strictly speaking, have given him an advantage in hand-to-hand combat because of the slipperiness of the oil.

Olga uttered a piercing scream. Fléchambeau raised his head on hearing that racket, which must have seemed to him to be a kind of sharp thunder. Fear was legible in his face.

What can I do? Olga asked herself.

The situation was, indeed, critical. The elephantine louse hastened its blind but sure progress. Would Fléchambeau seek salvation in flight? The mite was advancing rapidly. My God—so rapidly!

The young woman then altered the articulation of the mirror—instinctively, because the first concern of human beings and other creatures endowed with sight, when there is something that ought not to be happening, is to see clearly.

It was certainly a bright idea. An intense light was suddenly projected on to the two adversaries. The scene lit up violently. No more was required to deter a mite, since these tiny creatures, strangely enough, blind as they are, flee from light as from the plague. The mite abruptly turned tail, activating its four pairs of legs, and disappeared from the dazzling disk in which Fléchambeau, saved, was restraining the beating of his heart.

At that moment, Pons came back in. Olga told him what had happened. He was so accustomed to dealing with parasites that he was easily able to find the formidable dragon—smaller than the most derisive of aphids—without delay, even on a glass side, and slay it.

The mite episode thus had a happy ending, thanks to Olga's intervention—but it put into sharp relief the perilous aspect of a shrinkage that would soon expose Fléchambeau to all sorts of similar attacks. What would become of him, alone among the microbes—as alone as a castaway on a desert island, uniquely haunted by mysterious creatures?

The days went by. The inexorable diminution followed its regular course. Fléchambeau became molecular, then atomic. Use had to be made of the hypermicroscope, the most powerfully reinforced eye that had so far been invented.

The Pons house was funereal. Monsieur and Madame Monempoix did not come any more. They would not have been allowed into the laboratory anyway. No one went in there except Pons, Olga and the faithful Valentin, who thwarted all the attempts of cunning journalists avid to know exactly what was happening.

As might readily be imagined, the gossips had, indeed, accomplished their task. The local rags had begun to publish rumors of the enigmatic disappearance of a young man staying in Saint-Jean-de-Nèves. An odor of prodigy was floating in the air. To all the questions he was asked regarding Fléchambeau, however, Pons replied that he had left on a voyage. Where? He did not know.

¹⁰ In fact, the female scabies mite only lays two or three eggs per day, which is why scabies sufferers are not totally consumed in a matter of weeks.

Truer words were never spoken. Finding a plausible explanation for Olga's extensive visits was not easy, however. These visits, in themselves, prevented the acceptance of Pons's affirmations. He would not be believed until they ceased.

The last one was genuinely moving, to the highest degree.

It would have been dangerous to expose Fléchambeau too frequently to the radiations necessary to the employment of the hypermicroscope. Pons had therefore limited the number and duration of observation sessions. One Sunday morning, he said to Olga: "Come back this afternoon, without fail. I think it will happen this evening."

The day of mourning! A day, alas, long foreseen and dreaded! She would see her beloved for the last time—the man who, because of her, because he adored her, had swallowed the disastrous pills and was now descending into infernal regions from which no one ever returned!

Did she see him? Did she discern the ultramicroscopic man among the swarming multitude of particles of dust and forms that moved within the lunar circle of the objective lens? She was, at least, persuaded of it, basing her conviction on the immobility of a scarcely-visible dot.

For some time, Fléchambeau had avoided displacing himself. Pons was afraid that he might never move again—but how could one tell why he wasn't moving? Illness? A decision he had made? A plan? Might he be stuck to the glass like an animalcule? He wasn't dead, at any rate, since he was still shrinking.

Raising her head, Olga said to Pons: "I can see him." Then she resumed her contemplation, and said, tragically: "I can't see him any longer! Ah! Yes... No!"

Pons looked himself, and discovered nothing.

Fléchambeau had disappeared.

Olga dissolved in tears, and collapsed in the dimpled armchair. Pons said nothing. Oh, that silence saturated with dreams, which oppressed them!

A new horizon had hidden the ever-more-distant voyager from their eyes, as he drew away in an unprecedented fashion. In space, to be sure—but without taking a step! Without, in the final analysis, going anywhere!

"And he'll never come back—never!" Olga sobbed.

Pons let his arms fall, having raised them in order to do so. Olga watched him gently and piously—as piously as if he were closing the eyes of a dead friend—cover up the microscope with its crystal bell-jar.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I'll put little wedges under the bell, in order that the air can circulate freely."

Olga looked at him in astonishment through her tears, while putting on her hat.

"Voyages," he said, "are the making of youth."

She realized, by virtue of these words, that Pons was, so to speak, "in shock," and she was astonished that she had never noticed the troubling amplitude of his cranial cavity. But it was not for his sake that she was there, and she had no viable reason to remain there against her worthy parents' wishes. For a few seconds, therefore, she considered in a meditative fashion the pure reflections of the globe within which her fiancé had crossed the frontier of human and scientific sight...

Pons thought her worthy of happiness.

They shook hands, with a comprehensive grip—and she did it quite simply. It is often said, after all, that one should never be astonished by anything.